



## NC looks more to diversion programs for teens accused of minor crimes

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For the past 17 months, the Wake County Teen Diversion Program has helped 65 teens accused of committing some types of misdemeanor offenses at school from facing criminal charges or an arrest record. The program, which includes community service and treatment for behavioral issues, has helped some students keep their college scholarship offers and be able to join the military.

“Every day we make a decision whether we’re going to do the right thing or the wrong thing,” said Eric Andrews, coordinator of the Wake Teen Diversion Program. “Sometimes situations come together that cause things to happen.

“Should we penalize our kids for the rest of their lives for a mistake? These are still kids.”

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North Carolina will likely see more diversion programs like the one offered in Wake after lawmakers recently agreed that teens ages 16 and 17 will no longer automatically be charged as adults for crimes.

The “Raise The Age” law is expected to increase the number of cases referred to the juvenile court system. In response, the new state budget directs chief district court judges to establish partnerships between school systems and law enforcement agencies with the goal of reducing in-school arrests, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.

The new law will go into effect December 2019.

[NC becomes last state to ‘raise the age’ of teens in court]

State Rep. Duane Hall, a Raleigh Democrat who was a primary sponsor of the “Raise The Age” legislation, said Wake’s program puts it ahead of many other counties in dealing with the coming changes.

“The Wake County Teen Diversion Program has been a great program,” Hall said. “Only a few counties around the state have similar programs.

“That was one of the big reasons for us to work on this statewide juvenile bill. We don’t have this uniform program for diversions.”

Counties like Wake, Orange and Durham set up their misdemeanor teen diversion programs with an emphasis on helping 16- and 17-year-olds avoid facing adult criminal charges.

“This program allows students to continue with all of the possibilities for their future still intact,” said Wake County Superior Court Judge Vince Rozier, who along with school board member Christine Kushner co-chaired a group that helped get the Wake program started.

[New program would keep Wake County teens out of criminal court]

[In Durham, teens get a closer look at NC justice system]

[Orange County program sentences teen offenders to a second chance]

In Wake, the program is a collaboration of groups including the school system, law enforcement, District Attorney’s Office, Wake County Legal Aid and Wake County Public Defenders. The program is run by Alliance Behavioral Healthcare, which employs Andrews, the program coordinator.

“This program has been very successful at not only assuring accountability for these students but also through a thorough evaluative process identifying the underlying causes of their criminality and attempting to resolve them at this early stage to avoid additional incidents later on,” said Wake County District Attorney Lorrin Freeman.

School resource officers have referred 204 cases since the program started in March 2016, according to Andrews. The program is only open to first-time offenders, so 47 referrals were rejected.

“The majority of the kids we have are just average, everyday kids,” Andrews said.

He said the majority of students in the program faced charges of misdemeanor drug possession or possession of drug paraphernalia at school. He said the next largest group are students charged with assault or fighting on campus.

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**IF I HAD GOTTEN A RECORD, I COULDN'T DO WHAT I WANTED TO DO, LIKE GO TO COLLEGE, PLAY LACROSSE.**

Zayvion P., a rising high school senior



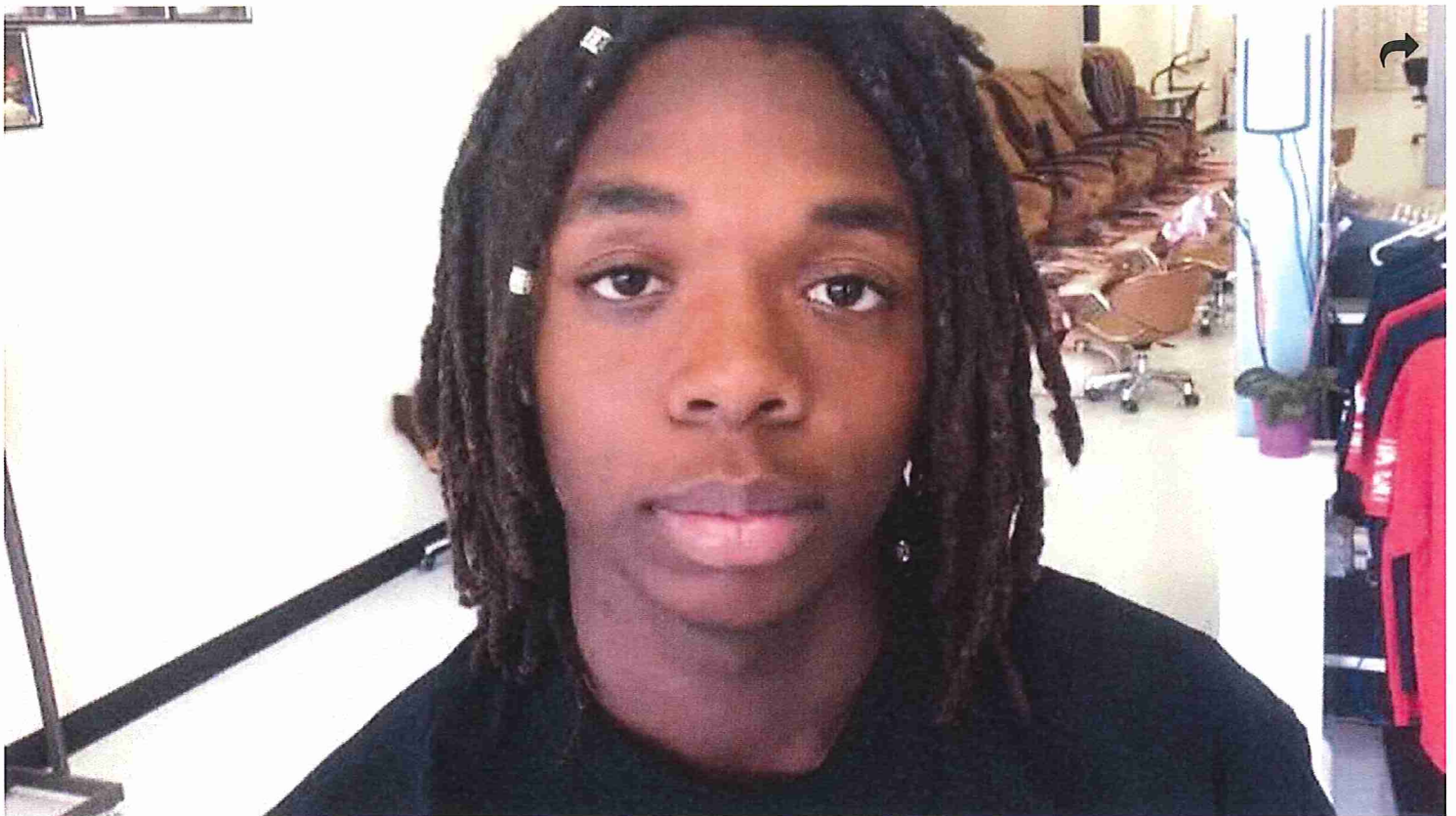
It didn't take much to persuade teens like Zavyion P. and Stephon B. to agree to join after they learned about the consequences of having a criminal record. The News & Observer is not listing the full names of the teens interviewed to help protect their privacy.

"I did think about how it could affect me, like I can't get a job, can't do none of that," said Stephon, 18, who faced charges for a fight at school. "Once you get that on your name, it's like a big bump in the hill for you. It takes a long time to get over it."

Now Stephon plans to attend Louisburg College this fall.

Zayvion, 16, had faced trespassing charges after he showed up on campus while he was supposed to be suspended from school after getting into a fight over a girl.

"If I had gotten a record, I couldn't do what I wanted to do, like go to college, play lacrosse," said Zayvion, a rising senior. "That's what I really want to do, play lacrosse."



Zayvion P., 16, talks about how much he learned from the Sean Ingram Academy while participating in the Wake County Teen Diversion Program for students charged with misdemeanors at school. T. Keung Hui — khui@newsobserver.com

Criminal charges aren't filed if teens complete the terms of the six-month program and don't get any new charges during that time.

Through the program, they are referred to places such as Teen Court; mediation; Haven House Services, which works with at-risk youth; and the Sean Ingram Academy, a program run by motivational speaker Sean Ingram. In addition to whatever punishment they may get from the school system, teens perform community service such as feeding the homeless, washing police cars and cleaning up after the horses at the Corral Riding Academy in Cary.

The Ingram Academy has served 51 students in the program, providing motivational speakers and discussing topics such as how the music teens listen to affects their mindset. Zayvion said he realized listening to hard rap music made him more likely to get into a fight.

Teresa P., 16, a rising senior who was referred to the program after fighting in school, said the Ingram Academy helped teach her to think before she reacts.

“The ultimate goal is they get to a maturity level that they can master their own mindset, not let others take their feelings and their emotions,” Sean Ingram said. “They can dictate their own feelings and emotions so that if people say things that they don’t like they can handle that.”

## Waiting list

Andrews said 65 teens have successfully completed the program and only six were later charged with committing other offenses. He said 60 students are currently going through the program, and 13 are waiting to start.

He said 19 teens couldn’t complete the program for various reasons.

The program has had a positive impact on young people by sparing them the life-altering negative consequences of a criminal charge, according to Jen Story, an attorney for Advocates for Children’s Services, a project of Legal Aid of North Carolina.

But Story also pointed to data her group obtained showing that Wake County’s African-American students are more likely to be referred to adult criminal court, juvenile court and the diversion program than white students.

“While the consequence of being referred to the diversion program is a far more productive and preferable consequence than being referred to criminal court, a pre-charge referral by an SRO is still a form of criminalization and is one that data and anecdotal experiences show is not as readily used for white students, whose misbehaviors are more often addressed through informal, school-based measures without ever involving an SRO,” Story said.

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From left to right, Teresa P., Sean Ingram, Zayvion W., Eric Andrews and Stephon B. pose for picture at the Sean Ingram Academy in Raleigh on July 5, 2017. Teresa, Zayvion and Stephon attended the Wake County Teen Diversion Program run by Andrews. T. Keung Hui - [khui@newsobserver.com](mailto:khui@newsobserver.com)

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